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ABSTRACT

In 1976 Dane County, Wisconsin was the site of a survey to determine the knowledge of rural youth and adults as to how their government functioned. The area was chosen because its residents were thought to be more politically active than individuals in other parts of the state. Personal or telephone interviews were conducted with 112 adults and questionnaires were administered to 292 members of the junior class at a rural high school. The questions concerned which offices had the most authority at the federal, state and local levels of the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government. At both the state and national levels, political knowledge was much lower for youth than for the adults, and the lowest levels of political knowledge were of the executive and legislative branches of government. The youth did surpass adults in knowledge of the judicial branch. However, the knowledge of the authority structure of the different branches of government was alarmingly low, especially at the national and state levels. If the findings of this survey are indicative of the broader high school population, there is need for concern among educators; it is difficult to understand how youth can make the choices necessary to continue our representative system of government with such limited knowledge of how it functions. (Author/DS)

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RURAL YOUTH AND ADULTS' KNOWLEDGE OF GOVERNMENTAL FUNCTIONS

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RURAL YOUTH AND ADULTS' KNOWLEDGE OF GOVERNMENTAL FUNCTIONS

The nation is in an era when apathy concerning our government and how it functions is widespread. This is evidenced by voter turnouts for elections at all levels being lower than most developed countries in the Western World. The schools generally reflect the society of which they are a part. The material developed here is an attempt to determine the knowledge which high school juniors in a rural school in Wisconsin had of how their government functioned. This was but a part of a larger study, including a group of adults, which looked at a number of questions concerning political and economic attitudes of the rural youth in the community.[1] The area was specifically selected as a test site for the research as there was reason to believe that residents there might be more politically active than individuals in other areas of the state.

Data for the present study were collected by the Wisconsin Survey Research Laboratory in the spring of 1976. Then scales were pretested in Dane County, Wisconsin, using personal interview techniques. The adult portion of the study is based on personal and telephone interviews conducted using an area probability sample of households. Total sample size is 112. All were noninstitutionalized adults, 18 years of age and over. The adult sample is split approximately evenly across sex with 44% female and 56% male.

The youth portion of the study is based on questionaires administered to 292 members of the junior class of a rural Wisconsin high school. One hundred forty were male and 152 female. They were from varied types of residence with 50 living on farms, 89 in the open country but not on a farm, 21 from towns of under 2,500, 30 from towns with populations of 2,500 to 10,000 and 100 from towns of 10,000 or more.

Questions were asked concerning which offices had the most authority at the federal, state and local levels of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. As an example, consider one of the questions which concerns federal executive authority:

Which of these offices has the most authority in executive matters at the federal level:

1. U.S. Representative
2. President
3. U.S. Senator
4. Don't know

A similar question was asked for each of the branches of government at each of the levels of government. The .05 level of significance was chosen to determine if the difference between the male and female means on the knowledge question was significant.

Table 1

YOUTH KNOWLEDGE OF GOVERNMENTAL FUNCTION

AT FEDERAL LEVEL

	Boys		Girls		Total		Sig
	Wrong	Right	Wrong	Right	Wrong	Right	
Executive	46.4	53.6	63.8	36.2	55.5	44.5	.004
Legislative	62.9	37.1	71.7	28.3	67.5	32.5	.137
Judicial	27.1	72.9	38.2	61.8	32.9	67.1	.061

On each federal level knowledge question, boys answered correctly more often than girls. In the case of executive branch, the difference was significant at greater than the .01 level. For both sexes the highest level of knowledge observed for the judicial branch, while the lowest for both groups was the legislative branch. At both the executive and legislative branches the majority of both girls and boys did not know which office performed that function. Over two-thirds did not know which office performed the legislative functions of government.

The same questions were asked of 112 adults in the community. The results are found in Table 2.

Table 2

ADULT KNOWLEDGE OF GOVERNMENTAL FUNCTIONS

AT FEDERAL LEVEL

	Men		Women		Total		Sig
	Wrong	Right	Wrong	Right	Wrong	Right	
Executive	44.4	55.6	46.9	53.1	45.5	54.5	.942
Legislative	45.2	54.8	53.1	46.9	49.1	50.9	.525
Judicial	28.6	71.4	30.6	69.4	29.5	70.5	.979

There were no statistically significant differences found in knowledge between adult males and females. It should be noted that when comparing the youth with the adults, the adults scored higher in every case with the exception of the males knowledge of the judicial branch, which was practically the same. The adults had noticably higher knowledge of all three branches of government than the students did. Yet, even the adults had a rather high percentage of wrong answers (from 29% to 53%).

Table 3

YOUTH KNOWLEDGE OF GOVERNMENTAL FUNCTIONS

AT STATE LEVEL

	Boys		Girls		Total		Sig
	Wrong	Right	Wrong	Right	Wrong	Right	
Executive	48.6	51.4	67.1	32.9	58.2	41.8	.002
Legislative	55.0	45.0	65.8	34.2	60.6	39.4	.007
Judicial	32.9	67.1	44.7	55.3	39.0	61.0	.050

Very similar findings were made at the state as at the national level, (Table 3). The male youths scored consistently higher for all three branches of government with the difference significant at the .01 level for the executive and the .05 level for the judicial. As with the federal level, the knowledge scores at the state level were much higher for both male and female youth for the judicial branch of government. Most important, the percentages of wrong answers are surprisingly high ranging from 67% (girls knowledge of the executive branch) down to 33% (boys knowledge of the judicial branch).

When the same question was asked of the adults, there were no significant differences of the answers of the males and females. However, the males did consistently score higher than the females on each question. In the other tables, there are surprisingly high percentages of wrong answers. For example, note that 23% of the men and 29% of the women did not know that the governor is the highest executive authority of the state.

Table 4

ADULT KNOWLEDGE OF GOVERNMENT FUNCTIONS

AT STATE LEVEL

	Men		Women		Total		Sig
	Wrong	Right	Wrong	Right	Wrong	Right	
Executive	22.6	77.4	28.6	71.4	25.9	74.8	.960
Legislative	44.4	55.6	59.2	40.8	50.9	49.1	.475
Judicial	30.2	69.8	44.9	55.1	36.6	63.4	.159

Similar findings were made at the state as at the federal level where the adults scored higher in nearly every comparison, with the only exception being the females on the judicial question.

Table 5

YOUTH KNOWLEDGE OF GOVERNMENT FUNCTIONS

AT LOCAL LEVEL

	Boys		Girls		Total		Sig
	Wrong	Right	Wrong	Right	Wrong	Right	
Executive	42.9	57.1	34.2	65.8	38.4	61.6	.162
Legislative	65.0	35.0	54.6	45.4	59.6	40.4	.091
Judicial	37.9	62.1	37.5	62.5	37.2	62.3	.934

The major difference found at the local level was that in every instance the girls scored higher than the boys. In no case, however, was the difference statistically significant. At both the national and state levels of government the boys generally had higher knowledge scores than the girls. Further, the knowledge scores for all youth were higher for each of the branches of government at the local level than at either the state or national levels.

Table 6

ADULT KNOWLEDGE OF GOVERNMENT FUNCTIONS

AT LOCAL LEVEL

	Men		Women		Total		Sig
	Wrong	Right	Wrong	Right	Wrong	Right	
Executive	49.2	50.8	36.7	63.3	43.7	56.3	.259
Legislative	36.5	63.5	46.9	53.1	41.1	58.9	.358
Judicial	25.9	74.1	34.8	65.2	29.8	70.2	.440

Very little differences were found between the knowledge scores of local government functions between adult males and females. The only major difference between youth and adults was that the adults had a considerably higher score on knowledge of who functioned as a legislator at the local level than the youth. This was true for both males and females.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS:

From the data presented, it is not possible to make generalizations to rural high school students beyond the community studied. At the same time, however, there is no evidence that our sample is especially unrepresentative of the political knowledge levels of the broader high school population. There is need for concern among educators if such trends do exist. The knowledge of the authority structure of the different branches of government was alarmingly low, and especially at the national and state levels. There are indications that this is more true for girls than boys. At both the state and national levels, political knowledge was much lower for the youth than the adults. The knowledge of the authority structure in the judicial branch was higher for the youth at both the state and national levels. The lowest levels of political knowledge were found for the executive and legislative branches of government.

There are two likely explanations for the higher knowledge scores which the adults had over the youth. One is that as people mature they become more interested in and affected by government and thus gain more knowledge of how it functions. Another is that when the adults were in

school knowledge of governmental structure was stressed much more than it is today.

Educators need to ask themselves the question: "Is it important that youth have a knowledge of the authority and leadership structure of all levels of government?" It is difficult to understand how the youth can make the choices necessary to continue our representative system of government with such limited knowledge of how it functions.

FOOTNOTE

[1] The larger project is sponsored by the Research Statutes of the University of Wisconsin College of Agriculture and Life Science, Archibald O. Haller, Principal Investigator.

APPENDIX

Test Instrument

1. Which of these offices has the most authority in executive matters, at the federal level?
   a. US Representative
   b. President
   c. US Senator
   d. Don't know
2. Which of these offices has the most authority in legislative matters at the federal level?
   a. US Senator
   b. US Secretary of State
   c. Attorney General
   d. Don't know
3. Which of these offices has the most authority in judicial matters at the federal level?
   a. US Supreme Court Justice
   b. Secretary of State
   c. US Senator
   d. Don't know
4. Which of these offices has the most authority in executive matters at the state level?
   a. State Assemblyman
   b. Governor
   c. State Senator
   d. Don't know

5. Which of these offices has the most authority in legislative matters at the state level?

   a. Secretary of State

   b. Governor

   c. State Senator

   d. Don't know

6. Which of these offices has the most authority in judicial matters at the state level?

   a. State Assemblyman

   b. Governor

   c. State Supreme Court Justice

   d. Don't know

7. Which of these offices has the most authority in executive matters at the local level?

   a. Mayor

   b. County Clerk

   c. County Board Member

   d. Don't know

8. Which of these offices had the most authority in legislative matters at the local level?

   a. County Judge

   b. County Clerk

   c. City Council President

   d. Don't know